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Spies who spy on spies

By Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

John Le Carre's famous picture of the counterspy game — a hall of mirrors producing a bewildering regress of illusion — exactly fits the real-life tale of Vitaly Yurchenko. Life once again imitates craft.

Yurchenko had been touted as a prize catch — the KGB man running U.S. and Canadian intelligence and the fifth highest official in the Soviet spy hierarchy. The boasting about his defection has been indiscreetly loud, and included the claim that it was the most useful defection since that of Col. Olav Penkovsky 25 years ago.

Now suddenly Yurchenko turns up at the Soviet Embassy, publicly claiming that he was no true defector; that he was abducted from the streets of Rome in August, drugged and slipped into the United States, then "tortured" by the CIA.

This very inopportune reversal comes two weeks before the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. It is a meeting whose substantive barrenness the President would like to hide by putting all the old Soviet outrages on the agenda, including the wanton abuse of human rights.

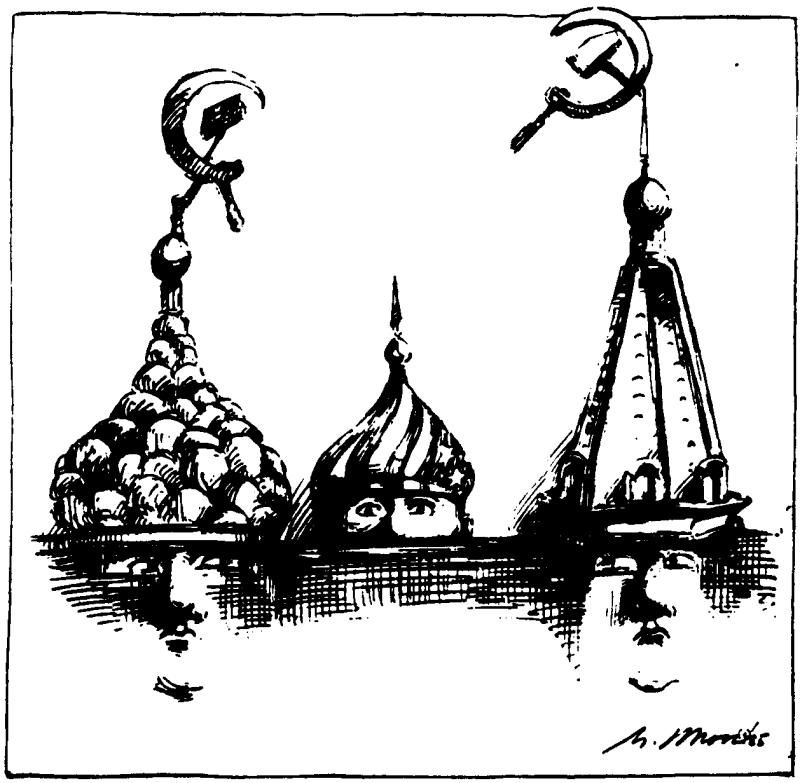
So isn't it logical to suppose that Yurchenko was a bold plant from the first, his supposed defection a poisoned pawn? The Soviets are great chess players, after all; they know the value of a trap set by the deceptively weak move.

The plausibility of the poisoned-pawn theory is enhanced by the first question addressed to Yurchenko at his stagy press conference. The Tass correspondent, whose style is not Sam Donaldson's, asked Yurchenko about the "violation of your every human and personal right ... perpetrated by the same people ... who, louder than others, speak about the need to uphold human rights."

It was like the dialogue of a well-rehearsed play. Yes, Yurchenko responded, it is "a typical example of lies and hypocrisy," and so much for any U.S. design to make summit mileage of the detention of the Sakharovs and the Jewish refuseniks.

The poisoned-pawn theory is so very logical, however, that students of this blundering world will find it a bit too contrived to be plausible. Such stories occur in well-plotted books, but rarely in life.

More prosaically, but more plausibly, the shaking and stuttering Yurchenko was confused from the outset and simply changed his mind. He had asked for discretion, but found that his tale-telling had been splashily leaked to the press. Knowing what KGB people must know of the treatment of families left behind as hostages, he could be trying to buy his way back with a cock-and-bull story.



Whichever theory of Yurchenko is true, it probably matters less than you will hear claimed by the protectors of counterintelligence budgets. Counterintelligence operations rising to real strategic value are rare. Even the best of them, the "double-cross" wholesale turning of German agents by the British in World War II, told far less than broken codes and gave mostly psychological satisfaction.

Counterintelligence genius is invariably more plentiful in the fabricated world of James Bond and George Smiley than in history — and not by accident.

It is a very problematical craft. Counterspying is a dark luxury most modern states dare not deny themselves. But it notoriously attracts, at the margins and sometimes even at the center, unstable, neurotic people, who possess what psychologists call "thin personal boundaries." Yurchenko may be one such.

Their primary loyalties, none too well anchored, may be so stretched by the strain of duplicity and furtiveness as to become as vague to the deceiver as to the deceived. In the mirrored world where spies spy on other spies watching still other spies, personal stability takes a murderous battering. And the yield is usually meager.

Just where Yurchenko fits this picture may not soon (or ever) be known. But it is useful to be reminded, even by a spectacular embarrassment, how easy it is to exaggerate the stakes in the spy-counterspy game. Spies do know secrets all right, but most of them are about one another and the really valuable information can usually — not always — be found for a price on the open market.

When you also add embarrassments into the balance, the wonder is that the counterintelligence mystique survives. But it does. For romantics, too, are born every minute.

(Edwin Yoder won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1979.)